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ABSTRACT

Career and life planning, while a complex task for people of all races and ages, is often compounded for black adolescent females. Social and economic traditions such as racism, poverty, and oppression have often retarded their employment perceptions, aspirations, expectations, and realities. This article explores the relationship between black female adolescents' career aspirations and expectations by examining the incongruencies among their career behaviors, aspirations, and expectations in relation to the realities of the American occupations structure. Additionally, black female adolescents' participation in and perception of the American labor force is reviewed. Recommendations are provided for personal and structural changes to facilitate the empowerment and success of tomorrow's young black working women. (Contains 30 references.) (GLR)

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Black Female Adolescents' Career Aspirations and Expectations: Rising to the Challenge of the American Occupational Structure

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Black female adolescents' career aspirations and expectations. It examines incongruencies among the career behaviors, aspirations, and expectations of young Black females in relation to the realities of the American occupational structure. Recommendations are provided for personal and structural changes to facilitate the empowerment and success of tomorrow's young Black working women.

Black Female Adolescents' Career Aspirations and Expectations: Rising to the Challenge of the American Occupational Structure

The numbers of working women in today's American society are increasing (U.S. Census Report, 1990). This increase is largely attributed to economic conditions, educational opportunities, the decline in family size and the increase in life expectancy (Cheatham, 1990; Osipow, 1983). Despite the expansion factors exist that impact their labor force participation and the availability of occupations. Women of the 1980s and 1990s value diverse roles and lifestyles. Some appreciate traditional lifestyles such as homemaker, wife, and mother. Others appreciate autonomous lifestyles that encourage employment outside of the home (Schaffer, 1981). With this autonomy comes consequences such as discrimination in employment and training as a function of gender (Michelozzi, 1988; Simms & Malveaux, 1986). These consequences transcend the color line and affect both Black and White

women. However, Black working women experience a dual challenge: that of race and gender (Evans & Herr, 1991).

While career and life planning is a complex task for people of all races and ages, its challenges are often compounded for Black adolescents (Lee & Simmons, 1988), and particularly for Black female adolescents (Simms & Malveaux, 1986; Smith, 1982). Social and economic traditions such as racism, poverty, and oppression have often retarded their employment perceptions, aspirations, expectations and realities (Lee & Simmons, 1988; Smith, 1982).

The purpose of this article is to explore the incongruences among the career behaviors, aspirations and expectations of Black female adolescents as related to the realities of the American occupational structure. To achieve this goal, an examination of the patterns and trends in the career behaviors and experiences of Blacks and black women will be presented. Additionally Black female adolescents' participation in and perception of the American labor force will be reviewed. Finally, recommendations will be offered for personal and structural changes to facilitate the empowerment and success of tomorrow's young Black working women.

CAREER BEHAVIORS AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACKS

Historically Blacks have experienced myths, messages, and realities related to vocational experiences which impact their motivation to seek employment and succeed in the labor force. Michelozzi (1988) describes this experience as the entanglement of Blacks in a stereotype bind. That is, Blacks who cluster in the ghetto struggle to break even. Unemployment for Blacks is dramatically higher and wagers are noticeably lower. Black youth, particularly in cities, experience unemployment rates that can reach and exceed 50 percent. Black women earn less hourly wages than White women and in order to match hourly wages or to exceed hourly wages overall, they must work longer hours. In 1984, Black women experienced an unemployment rate of 13.1% while White women experienced an unemployment rate of 5.7%. Clearly there appears to be a lower demand for Black women in the labor market (Jones, 1986). Michelozzi (1988) continues that Black female adolescents (16-19 years) experienced a 39.2% unemployment rate while White female adolescents (16-19 years) experienced a 13.1% unemployment rate. The perception that Blacks, Black women, and Black female adolescents have a strong chance of entering the labor force and advancing is questionable (Bureau of the Census, March 1990 and 1989).

In the 1990s Black Americans continue to be characterized by a unique minority experience within a White dominated society. This experience is most frequently explained in terms of oppressive social and economic forces which appear to have emerged from slavery and are coupled with rapid urbanization in a racist society (The Toledo Journal, 1984; Vaughn-Cooke, 1984; Evans, et al., 1984). Despite the belief that in the late 1980s and early 1990s Blacks are more prosperous than in the past, an assemblage of relevant economic facts continue to describe the realities of mass deprivation in areas as crucial as labor force participation and employment (Vaughn-Cooke, 1984; Sue, 1990). Briggs (1975) stated that the current labor market experience of Black Americans controls the present and shapes the future. That is, of current labor participation (employment, unemployment, and family income) as well as the employment patterns of Blacks influence the present and future lives of Black Americans. These elements are mutually interdependent and their importance rests with an understanding of their confluences rather than their individual accounts (Simms & Malveaux, 1986).

Since World War II numerous Black workers have penetrated the industrial component of the labor market. In 1970, the manufacturing industrial sector employed the largest number of

Blacks. Twenty-four percent of all Black workers were employed in the textile industry and were geographically located in the South. Approximately 4 percent of all Black workers were employed in agriculture (U.S. Bureau of Census). A more realistic perception of the employment status of Blacks in American industry includes a look at occupational patterns and statuses. According to Briggs (1975), the largest single occupational grouping of Blacks in 1970, was the low-wage service worker category. Twenty-eight percent of all Black workers and 43.0 percent of all Black female workers were employed as service and/or household workers. Fifty percent of all Black workers in white collar occupations were in clerical occupations.

In 1990, Blacks continued to be concentrated in nonprofessional and non-managerial occupations. Thirty-four percent of Black males and 12.0 percent of Black females were employed as operators, fabricators, and laborers. Thirteen percent of Black males and 18.8 percent of Black females were employed in managerial and professional specialty occupations. Thirty-nine percent of Black females and 16.6 percent of Black males were employed in technical, sales, and administrative support occupations (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). The influence of Black employment pattern realities upon the congruence exhibited in the vocational behaviors, aspirations

and expectations of Blacks emerge as a viable issue for Black Americans, young and old.

CAREER BEHAVIOR AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN

Historically, Black women have been and continue to be attracted to the labor force in large numbers. In the last three decades, these numbers have increased significantly. Approximately 47.0 percent of the total population of Black women 16 years old or older were employed or looking for jobs in 1962 (Jones, 1986). Almost 30 years later, approximately 60.0 percent of the total population of Black women 18 years old or older were employed or looking for jobs (Bureau of the Census, 1990). For generations, they have held jobs outside their homes, raised families, and maintained homes. A number of factors impact the need and desire for Black women to seek employment.

A primary impetus for the decision to work regardless of whether they are married or single heads of household, has been inadequate economics. Joseph and Lewis (1981) assessed the socioeconomic positions of White and Black family median incomes during 1978. They found that the median income of year round full-time Black female workers was $8,290 compared to $8,870 for White female workers. The median income of non-White women who were

full-time workers with less than a high school education was $5,384 compared to $5,932 for White women. The median earnings of full-time, non-White working women with a college education (i.e., four or more years) was $10,061 compared to $10,575 for White women. Today, this trend continues. The U.S. Bureau of Census (1990) reported that the median income of year round full-time Black female workers was $17,390 compared too$18,920 for White female workers. The median income of Black women who were full-time workers with four years of high school was $16,440 compared to $16,910 for White women who were full-time workers with four years of high school. Finally, the median earnings of full-time Black working women with a college education (i.e., four or more years) was $26,730 compared to $27,440 for White working women with a college education (i.e., four or more years).

Needs unique to Black women which emerge from problems related to gender, race, and socioeconomics become evident. An analysis of the vocational and economic status of Black women, more often than not, reveals their dubious distinction as the most underpaid and underemployed adults in America (Evans, et al., 1991; Sue & Sue, 1990; Schaffer, 1981). To illustrate, Jones (1987) established that in 1983 the unemployment rates for Black females were twice those for White

females with the highest unemployment rates among the 16 to 19 year olds. Consequences of experiencing substandard economics, being Black and female include: (1) poor Black women bear more children and (2) poor Black women bear children at an earlier age. The impact of poverty, race, and gender on the educational and living standards of Black women can be profound. Specifically, the potential for the maintenance of lower standards is frequently heightened (Sue & Sue, 1990; Joseph & Lewis, 1981).

Despite the high unemployment rates and traditionally underpaid positions, Black women have and continue to display a tenacious commitment to the labor force. They continue to seek employment in spite of initial failure to find jobs. Through this determination Black women's vocational roles began to expand after World War II. In the past four decades and particularly the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement facilitated an increase in vocational opportunities. Many Black women, against the odds and with strong support of the family, have earned advanced degrees in fields ranging from mathematics to entomology and have excelled as researchers, university professors, and engineers (Davis, 1983-1984). Yet, the vocational accomplishments of Black women, though significant relative to their emergence from

historical positions of field laborer, sex object, and breeder, still remain underrepresented (Michelozzi, 1988; Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibition, 1982).

CAREER BEHAVIOR AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK FEMALE ADOLESENTS

Adolescence is a principal stage in human development between childhood and adulthood. Unfortunately, Black adolescence has been marginally researched. Research dispensed in the literature has concentrated primarily on maladaptive social behaviors of black adolescents (Gibbs, 1985) and virtually neglected the experiences of Black female adolescents (Gibbs, 1985; Smith, 1982).

The literature concerning Black female adolescents, though not extensive, cites the existence of distinct challenges in career and occupational development and decision making (Zunker, 1991; Schiamberg & Lee, 1989; Smith, 1982). One challenge is the lack of experience generally available that provides adequate background information with which to facilitate the expression of realistic vocational interests (Lee, 1988). Additionally, Black female adolescents experience the dual challenge of gender and ethnic minority membership. While stereotypic roles traditionally assigned women are applicable to Black female adolescents, Black women are socialized to

be more vocationally assertive and less vocationally passive than the typical female stereotypes (Schaffer, 1981). Black females of all ages tend to be socialized to work outside the home and, if married, to assume a dual career lifestyle. Mott & Mott (1982), for example, studied the attitude consistency among American youth, ages 14 to 21, and found that Black (male and female) respondents felt both parents, for economic reasons, needed to work outside the home.

As an ethnic minority, vocational stereotypes assigned to Blacks apply to and challenge young Black women. Most realize that, due to economics, work will consume a major portion of their lives. Simultaneously, economics impact individual perceptions of career and life planning dreams and realities. Some, regardless of socioeconomic status, view the family as a vital contributor to their occupational and educational development. Others, due to socioeconomic status, view the family as a contributor to their career development.

Generally little congruence has been reported between the occupational aspirations and expectations of Black female adolescents. Regardless of socioeconomic status, they tend to set lower occupational goals and predict as well as expect lower occupational success. Further, they appear to develop a gap between their occupational aspirations

and expectations in the tenth grade of school. Moreover, they seem to lower their occupational choices in their senior year of high school (Kelly & Wingrove, 1975; Smith, 1975). However, more recent reports reveal an increase in the numbers of Black female adolescents reporting confidence in expecting to realize their occupational aspirations (Thomas, 1986; Brown, 1984).

In 1989, 43.2 percent of all Black related children under 18 years of age compared to 14.1 percent of all White related children under 18 years of age were poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). clearly, it is feasible to envision that many young Black females come from poor to moderate homes where competing demands for the assumption of family responsibilities may be placed upon their time for education and career pursuits (Smith, 1982). Low socioeconomic Black female adolescents tend to assume, within the home, more responsibility for the care of siblings and household tasks.

Widespread numbers of young black women are exhibiting increased rates of childbearing. According to the 1990 census, the Black populous comprised 12.1 percent of the resident population. Their numbers grew faster than either the total or the White population. Since 1980, their numbers have increased by 13.2 percent, compared with 6.0 percent for the White population and 9.8 percent for the total

population. The impetus for the overlying growth rate of the Black population was largely attributed to natural factors; that is, the combined result of a younger population and of age-specific fertility rates somewhat higher than those of Whites. Early entry into motherhood adversely affects the employment of young Black women. Young unwed mothers tend to experience fewer social supports, fewer personal resources, greater psychological problems, and more career and educational constraints than either mature mothers or young teenagers without children (Bureau of the Census, 1990; Michelozzi, 1988; Simms & Malaveaux, 1986).

The labor force participation rate of Black women has not increased as rapidly as that of White women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990; Jones, 1987). More importantly, Black female adolescents, aspiring to employment, continue to be challenged by factors which clash with their occupational and educational aspirations and expectations. They continue to experience a unique set of realities which impact their perceptions of and opportunities for employment as well as advancement. The literature suggests that these realities could be the result of a system designed to scourge the Black female (Evans, 1991; Simms & Malveaux, 1987). Many questions emerge if this is true. Two questions relevant to this chapter are: How do Black

youth view their chances for employment and advancement within the African labor market? and How is the American system designed to expunge Black youth? Each question will be briefly examined.

PERCEPTIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT AND ADVANCEMENT

Most Black females will have to work as adults to support themselves or their families, with or without a spouse. Further, the data reveal that employment problems experienced early in life are important predictors of labor market problems experienced as an adult. Given such realities, it is important to understand how Black youth perceive their chances for employment and advancement within the American labor market. This knowledge will provide a conveyance for empowering Black female adolescents to gain control over their lives and enhance self-esteem.

Researchers report divergent views of Black youth's perceptions of their chances for employment and advancement within the American labor market. More often than not, the perception of limited control over their environments and a lack of the competencies to gain control are manifested in the area of employment (Sue, 1990; Thomas, 1986; Brown, 1984; Smith, 1981). For example, Dean (1984) reports that well documented evidence exists to support the idea that Black youth describe an external locus of control perception of the world and

acknowledge limited personal control. Consequently, many feel that society thwarts their personal goals.

However, recent researchers have suggested that the numbers of Black female adolescents who seem confident about achieving their career and occupational goals are increasing. That is, more Black female adolescents are demonstrating lower discrepancies between their ideal (occupations preferred regardless of the actuality of financial resources, personal abilities, and freedom of choice) and their real (occupations preferred in view of a realistic assessment of the probability of success in achieving the desired goal) career and occupational aspirations (Thomas, 1986; Brown, 1984).

Historically, Blacks have experienced marginal employment opportunities in the United States. Yet, in spite of the odds, many have continued to seek employment and break the labor barriers. Today, the tendency continues and Blacks are experiencing an upward trend in unemployment rates. A fundamental reason for this reality is that the economy is not providing enough jobs to render employment for all who wish to work (Zunker, 1990; Burbridge, 1987). This is particularly true for Black youth. In March, 1990, there were 13.5 million working Blacks 16 years old and over of whom 1.5 million were unemployed. Black females had an annual average labor force participation rate of

57.8 which is lower than that of men (Black and White) and White women. The question of the impact of realities such as high unemployment and insufficient numbers of jobs on the new and increasing optimistic attitudes of young Black women as well as those of their counterparts must be raised.

The high unemployment rates, especially for low-income Blacks, may be attributed to existing employment and training programs. Overall, Black women have at best received training which has shifted them into low-wage clerical fiends with average annual earnings scarcely above the poverty level (Burbridge, 1987). Some authors contend that low labor force participation rates are the result of a system designed to exclude Blacks, regardless of age or gender (Evans, 1991; Cheatham, 1990; Burnham, 1989). Clearly, the design of the American labor market must be more closely scrutinized to ascertain the determinants for tthe underrepresentation of Black youth and a plan to realistically address the problem must be developed. Employment and training programs have been instituted to address the plight of the poor. However, their success, especially for young Black women, has been questioned.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

The initiatives of the 1960s, often referred to as the Great Society

(Burnham, 1989; Burbridge, 1987) offered numerous employment and training programs for persons who were economically disadvantaged or facing barriers to employment. Emanating from this period and focusing on adults and youth were two major employment and training efforts: the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 (CETA) and the Job Training Partnership Act, P.L. 97-300 of 1982 (JTPA). Primarily, the intent of these efforts was to prepare the underrepresented and unemployed for employment and promote their economic self-sufficiency. CETA was replaced by JTPA. An outcome of this replacement was the decentralization of program responsibility to the state and local governments as well as the private sector. These institutions were expected to provide the bulk of employment opportunities to program participants. One component of JTPA responsible for the provision of job training services to involve young Black women was Title II (Training Services for the Disadvantaged) including Parts A (Adult and Youth Programs) and B (Summer Youth Employment and Training Programs). However, the fate of Blacks remained the same: economic, social, and political forces historically binding them to low-wage jobs, high unemployment, specific occupations and industries, limited mobility and advancement continued (Simms & Malaveaux, 1986). Burbridge (1987) offers specific

realities that characterize the experience of women, particularly Black women, in the employment and training programs: (1) chronic and historic underrepresentation, (2) mass training for female-intensive occupations leading to a pattern of unchallenged occupational segregation, and (3) poverty based postprogram earnings of women trainees.

While the literature supports the idea that on-the-job training and public service employment provide better opportunities than classroom training assignment and work experience placement; reality is that Black women of all ages continue to be underrepresented in on-the-job training (OJT) and adult work experience programs and highly represented in classroom (or institutional) training and public service employmentprograms (Simms & Maalaveaux, 1986). Still and all, many authors suggest that ethnic minority women generally do better in OJT programs. The question of whether OJT services are being offered to persons intended to receive them must be closely scrutinized. Additionally, the impact of the reality of the absence of jobs in the 1990s upon the concept of training programs such as OJT alone must be deliberated. Clearly, a rabid dissection of the efficacy of traditional employment and training programs toward the

empowerment of Black female adolescents and their future employment and economic self-sufficiency is warranted.

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S YOUNG BLACK WORKING WOMEN

The formation of career goals begins early in life. A period of realistic choice making occurs at 17 or 18 years of age and occupational aspirations are adjusted to conform to the perceived realities of one's actual chances for achieving desired goals (Dawkins, 1989; Kelly & Wingrove, 1975). Consequently, young people entering early adulthood are expected to formulate occupational plans. An important aspect of realistic choice making for Blacks, including young Black women, is the extent to which they perceive the occupational structure as being open and their chances of competing for positions and advancement as being fair (Dawkins, 1989; Lee, 1988; Smith, 1982). The following recommendations are offered to promote personal and structural changes to facilitate the self-determination, empowerment, and success of tomorrow's young Black women. However, it is imperative to note that many authors advocate an activist stance in advancing the empowerment of Blacks, young and old (Simms & Malveaux, 1987). At the same time, we are reminded that Blacks are not a homogeneous population. Consequently, to facilitate the process

of increasing the empowerment of young Black women an understanding of, appreciation for and valuing of their diversity as individuals within a group is vital (Sue & Sue, 1990).

One enterprise is the institution of more assailing affirmative action efforts designed to abate the exclusionary processes of past discrimination which have historically denied people of color, particularly Black women, access to distinct areas of the labor market. The American labor force and educational system must continue to aggressively recruit and appropriately train Blacks (regardless of gender, age, or economics) for existing positions in underrepresented occupations such as medicine, law, engineering and other technological rather than service oriented disciplines. For low income Black females, efforts might include more intensive work to upgrade skills, reduce the burden of taxation on families, and increase participation in on-the-job training programs.

Coupled with this reality and undertaken to promote success within these and other occupations is a concentrated and bona fide effort, by the system (government, labor, and helping professionals), to research and understand the early occupational socialization experiences of Black women (young and old) which influence career decisions prior to their entry into the labor force. For example, there is

a growing body of evidence in the literature to suggest and support a positive influence of Black family socialization factors in the occupational attainment process for young Blacks (Dawkins, 1989; Lee & Simmons, 1988). The underrepresentation of Blacks in high-status professional occupations is well documented. While research on status attainment has included the impact of social background, educational, and social/psychological factors on occupational outcomes, less concentration has been awarded long-term aspirations for professional-level occupations as major dependent variables. Therefore, Dawkins (1989) proposed a model to study the impact of individual and family background factors, educational plans, and social/psychological factors on the maintenance of plans for professional careers among a national sample of young Black adolescents. Overall, the results illuminated the magnitude of abiltity, educational plans, and family influence as fundamental to determining the long-term commitment of Black youth to pursuing professional careers.

A vehicle to promote research and understanding is to convene more conferences on Black women to address issues unique to them, raise and attempt to resolve questions particular to their realities, and seek solutions. Julianne Malveaux suggested in Slipping through the Cracks (1986) that recommendations offered by the Congressional Black

Caucus Foundation and The Review of Black Political Economy was to bring researchers together, sanction the opportunity to address critical policy issues (e.g., welfare, child care, budget cuts, budget composition, economic status of Black female-headed families, characteristics of employment industries and their impact of Black women, possible improvements in those characteristics, etc.), make suggestions about their resolution, and promote improvement in the economic status of working Black females.

With the strong forces of racism and sexism surrounding Black female adolescents, the direction and assistance offered by helping professionals such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers continues to be viable. The development and implementation of programs which are ethnoculturally sensitive by ethnoculturally sensitive and competent helping professionals is mandatory. For example, recognizing the value of collective efforts generally held by the Black population and capitalizing on the group concept, a group for Black female adolescents struggling with career and life planning issues could be offered on a broader scale within the school system. The ultimate objective of such a group being to promote long-range planning, networking, and self-motivation. To strengthen the potential for effectiveness beyond the school community, collaborate

efforts could be made with external resources such as the Black churches, Black Greeks, etc.; thereby exhibiting an appreciation for and value of the power the "collective" effort exudes.

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